

Playing God



The word biohacking conjures a sinister image in most minds. From the view point of biohackers, the term itself is constantly evolving. Loosely put, it refers to the modifying of a biological structure by introducing foreign substances that could be chemical, physical, or electronic in nature. One perspective of biohacking involves working on developing cells or genes outside one's body. The second, deals with "hacking" into one's own body to gain control over systems within it, which are otherwise inaccessible.

A TRANS-HUMANIST MOVEMENT

Trans-humanism—or simply put, the advent of a superior race of human beings—is an idea that is generally scoffed at. Biohackers are people who believe in it and work to transform it into reality. Hacking of the body and mind enables extraction of higher utility from the human genes than previously thought possible.

Biopunk hackers are those brave albeit fanatical few who are enthusiastic enough to experiment on themselves. With just an eBay account and a do-it-yourself laboratory, one can reach great heights in this field. Ranging from injecting sensors under the skin that monitor the body and open doors, to attaching electronic circuits in the eyes that can click pictures of whatever you see, the scope of this field is vast. The past few years have witnessed the face of biohacking change from amateur geneticists tinkering with theoretical knowledge and conducting tests in their makeshift labs to a well-developed network of hackers around the world and organizations that conduct events, host virtual networks, and create co-working spaces for enthusiasts to swap stories, advice, and protocols.

THE LONG ARM OF LAW

The field of biohacking is growing tremendously day by day. The biopunk or DIYbio (Do it yourself bio) strive to make biotechnology available for the common man who's interest lies in the field. Although it is hailed as a democratic science, the powerful yet affordable technology is also becoming a cause of growing concern for institutions of law and order. There exists ambiguity in the cause of the rise of amateur gene enthusiasts. *Is it a harmless pursuit of one's interests or a looming bioterrorism threat?*

The Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate established by US intelligence has been following the developments in this field very closely. However, most experts within the biohacking community are convinced that these fears are baseless.

Eckhard Wimmer, a virologist at New York State University, demonstrated that polio virus could be assembled from small pieces of hereditary genetic material. He states that for bioterrorism, nothing new needs to be synthesized. Along with his own works, he cited previous instances of bioterrorism that required very little knowledge of genetics and its associated techniques. In any case, as of now, apart from codes of ethics written by renowned DIYbio activists, only the WMD's regulations are applicable to this fast evolving field.

BECOMING A PART OF THE BUZZ

The biohacking community is currently strong and well developed; and becoming a part of it is very easy. With little effort, one can find out the nearest biohacking group and pitch in for a mutual exchange of ideas and resources. DIYbio itself is a full-fledged institution, founded in 2008, with a mission of "establishing a vibrant, productive and safe community of DIY biologists."

(A note from the writer. Any readers interested in this may

contact us at editor@themitpost.com, for further details and meeting other students who might share a common interest.)